
Title of Object

Nine Scenes from the Tale of Genji

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Tawaraya Sōtatsu

Culture: Japanese

Date of Object: Early 17th century

Country: Japan

Accession Number: 2015.79.5

File Created: 10/24/2016

Material/Medium: Eight-panel folding screen; ink, color, and gold on gilded paper

Author of File: Mary McMahan

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Japanese and Korean Art

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Tour Topics

Betrayal, Love_Honor_and_Betrayal, Group 5, Highlights 1600-1850, stories/storytelling, women, writing, emotion, beauty, fashion/dress, gender roles, landscape, architecture, relationships, Innovation

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take a minute to look at this screen. What emotions does it evoke?
 2. How would this screen have been used? Would your answer change if I told you that it was probably part of a much larger set of screens depicting scenes from all fifty-four chapters of the Tale?
 3. As you look at this screen with its depictions of scenes from the Tale of Genji, how does it differ from other illustrations of book you've seen? What do you see that makes you say that?
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Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

From the Sackler exhibition, where our screen was loaned: "The Tale of Genji—the story of the life and loves of Prince Genji—reveals the complex relationships in the Heian court (794–1185) as its members encounter pleasure, love, treachery, suffering, and loss. The Buddhist sensibility of ephemerality and karmic action are woven throughout this influential eleventh-century work."

Regarding the Tale of Genji, by Lady Murasaki: To briefly summarize a 1000 page, very complex tale...Prince Genji was born and his beauty astonished his majesty. His first son was born to a different consort and thus was the future heir apparent. Genji, for political reasons, was removed from the line of imperial lineage and made a commoner. His mother died when he was 3. The 54 chapters of the book follow his romantic pursuits with girlfriends, his step mother, nieces - all relationships relating back to the death of this mother, "oedipal complex," ending with his death and stories of his descendants.

From Khan Academy: The Tale of Genji is considered the most influential work of classical Japanese literature and the visual elements surrounding it impact Japanese art history and culture. It is required reading in Japanese schools today and has recently (2015) received a new translation.

"The book is full of palace intrigue, but more important is the attention Murasaki paid to describing the beauty and emotions of the story, from the perfect kimono ensemble to the sprig of plum blossom attached to a bittersweet love letter. The Japanese have a term for this, - mono no aware, a pathos for the fleeting moments of beauty, joy, even heartbreak that are part of being human. These emotions and actions are portrayed using subtle means in the pictures. " (Khan Academy)

"Though this tale is full of love stories, it would not be considered the "50 Shades of Grey" of its time. Physical contact between men and women is hardly ever described in "Genji" as courtly lovers almost never saw one another clearly, and certainly not naked; full nudity is rare even in traditional Japanese erotic art. Women of the upper class sat hidden in murky rooms, behind curtains, screens, and sliding doors. For a respectable woman to be seen in daylight, especially standing up, instead of reclining in an interior, under many layers of clothing, would have been provocative beyond belief. Women were shielded by curtains even when they spoke to male members of their own family. A male suitor could be driven wild by the sight of a woman's sleeve spilling out from underneath a shade, or by the mere sound of silk rustling behind a lacquer screen." (Buruma) See label for description of scenes shown.

Lady Murasaki—not her real name; her sobriquet was the name of Genji's great love—was born into a minor branch of the Fujiwara clan. Her father was a provincial governor, who, unusually for the time, passed on his deep knowledge of Chinese literature to his bookish daughter. Normally, only men wrote in Chinese, as a sign of superior status, while women confined themselves to Japanese. This explains why the first writers of literary prose in Japanese were highborn women, as were their readers." (Buruma)

Regarding Japanese screens: "Traditional interiors are spacious and open, with few solid walls, allowing cool, drying breezes to pass freely through the entire building. These large spaces, broken only by the pillars which help support the roof, also provide plenty of room for large gatherings of people. To create smaller, more intimate and private areas, the Japanese use a number of ingenious methods to divide the space.... One of the earliest and most versatile formats was the folding screen. Known in Japanese as byobu, literally "wind barrier", folding screens were imported from Korea as early as the 7th century. Constructed by pasting paper over a light wooden lattice, panels were connected by paper hinges. Depending on intended use, the number of panels varied widely. There were two, three, four, six, and even eight paneled screens. From extremely low to medium and tall, byobu were also created in a variety of heights....Highly decorative folding screens brought art into daily life. They were also very functional. Light and portable, they were taken on picnics to block the wind. Inside they provided protection from chilly drafts. Arranged to create a small enclosure, they helped to provide a degree of

privacy from the other inhabitants of the house. Or, used as a backdrop for formal occasions, they helped to create an impressive display of elegance and wealth.” (The Art of Asia)

See the video from the Sackler Gallery, to understand the artist’s painting innovations.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Artist information: Tawaraya Sōtatsu (ca. 1570–ca. 1640), a fountainhead of Japanese painting and design, is one of the most influential yet elusive figures in Japanese culture. Sōtatsu’s work is instantly recognized by its bold, abstracted style, lavish swaths of gold and silver, and rich jewel tones. Much of the artist’s life, however, remains a mystery. How a working-class owner of a Kyoto fan shop transformed into a sophisticated designer with a network of aristocratic collaborators is still an enigma. (Sackler)

The Importance of Sōtatsu: “In early seventeenth-century Kyoto, Sōtatsu, a talented craftsman, found himself at the center of a momentous shift in Japanese society. When the ancient royal court ceded its power to rising classes of warriors and merchants, a new audience emerged, eager to bedeck itself with the trappings of the cultural elite. Sōtatsu, through his experimental painting techniques and brilliantly conceived compositions, transformed and translated Japan’s tightly controlled courtly artistic style for this new age.

His revolutionary designs, and the works created by later followers, coalesced into the style known as *rinpa*, a triumph of Japanese aesthetics that emerged in the early seventeenth century and continued into the early twentieth century. Despite being named for the Edo-period painter Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), *rinpa* (translated as “school of Rin”) owes much of its legacy to Sōtatsu and Kōetsu. In fact, it was Sōtatsu who advanced the vitally important painting technique known as *tarashikomi* (“dropping in”), in which paint is dropped into a still-wet background to create delicate, serendipitous details such as flower petals and water ripples.

Sōtatsu’s influence cannot be overstated. By the late nineteenth century, *rinpa* was firmly established as a major movement and, to some extent, became synonymous in the West with Japanese culture. The first modern Sōtatsu exhibition in Tokyo in 1913 galvanized the art world, inspiring a new generation of Japanese artists. His designs echo within the works of luminaries such as Klimt and Matisse—and throughout Art Deco style—making his four hundred-year-old paintings appear unexpectedly contemporary.” (Sackler)

Regarding the time in which the screen was created: “Sōtatsu lived in an era of profound social change. The warrior class led by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) and his descendants assumed political power in the early seventeenth century and, for the first time, permitted the spread of previously privileged knowledge. Classical literature and its interpretations and visual representations, once restricted to the aristocracy, gradually became available to a wider audience. Ancient narratives, such as *Tales of Ise* and *Tale of Genji*, were codified, and a standardized set of images—depicting key moments in the narrative plots—created a common pool for the public imagination. Sōtatsu was a singular force in devising those canonical images...” (Sackler)

There is some indication that the screen was commissioned for a wedding: “Prince Genji’s story was visualized in multiple ways, particularly in the early Edo period. Here, the story is told in part, via nine scenes related to seven of the tale’s fifty-four chapters. These screens may have been part of a large

ensemble that depicted all the chapters; their short height suggests that they were made for a wedding trousseau. During the Edo period, Genji screens were not uncommon in marriage dowries, suggesting that knowledge of the tale and its modes of comportment were important to high-status women. These elegant lessons of behavior competed with and complimented the neo-Confucian ethic espoused by the powerful Tokugawa shogunate.” (Sackler)

According to Buruma, “In the Edo period (1603-1868), when the pleasure-seeking merchant class influenced culture as much as the more ascetic samurai, “Genji” was indispensable to a well-bred person’s education, along with the tea ceremony and flower-arranging. Washburn tells us that young ladies would receive illustrated volumes of “Genji” as part of their dowry. The attraction of the Heian masterpiece for Edo-period merchants lay partly in its aristocratic style, much admired by the newly rich.”

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This screen shows nine scenes from consecutive chapters from the Tale of Genji in order from right to left. The far right panel depicts Genji sitting behind a writing desk and gazing out toward a setting sun. It is a specific moment from chapter 19 in which Genji, mourning the death of his lover, recites the following poem: “A rack of cloud across the light of evening, as if they, too, wore mourning weeds.”

Moving left, each panel of the screen depicts a single scene from chapters 20 through 25. The far left panel actually includes two scenes from chapter 26, in which Genji first tries to seduce a young woman and then is rejected by her. Because this single eight-panel screen includes scenes from eight chapters, it was probably part of a much larger set of screens depicting scenes from all fifty-four chapters of the Tale.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Sōtatsu: Making Waves, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery: <http://www.asia.si.edu/sotatsu/about.asp> and <http://www.asia.si.edu/sotatsu/object.asp?id=ELS2015.6.2>

Links to video on Freer-Sackler site, detailing the artist’s innovations:
<http://www.asia.si.edu/sotatsu/play.asp?video=craft>

The Tale of Genji”, Murasaki Shikibu, Translated by Royall Tyler

Ian Buruma, “The Sensualist. What makes “The Tale of Genji” so seductive.” *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2015: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-sensualist-books-buruma>

Scenes from the Tale of Genji, Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/art-japan/edo-period/a/scenes-from-the-tale-of-genji>

The Art of Asia, Architecture, Scrolls and Screens: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/architecture/scrolls-screens-transcript.cfm.html>

Prop idea - check out a copy of The Tale of Genji from the library.